

Mzonjani and the beginning of the Iron Age in Natal

by

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SYNOPSIS

Mzonjani, dated to the third/fourth century AD represents the earliest expression of the Iron Age in Natal. Apart from Enkwazini it is the only excavated site of this period, and Mzonjani has produced the largest ceramic assemblage, which is described and illustrated. This material is compared with 21 related sites in Natal, and Schofield's classification is shown to be incorrect in terms of sequence and interrelationships. Some tentative ideas on the economy and ecology of these settlements are discussed. There is a close resemblance between these Natal assemblages and eastern Transvaal ones of similar age, as well as undated material from southern Mozambique.

INTRODUCTION

Mzonjani is on a flattish hilltop 2,5 km inland from the coast at La Lucia and 15 km north of Durban, near Mt Edgecombe (S 29°44'0": E 31°03'15"). During January 1977 a strip of land 100 m wide was bulldozed clear of sugar-cane and top soil as the first stage in the construction of the National Road 2 freeway northward up the coast from Durban. R. Prendergast, working for the contractor, Strachan Construction, and G. Bulter, the consulting engineer, recognised pottery thus exposed as being of potential archaeological interest and contacted the Natal Museum. On inspection we realised that the site should be salvaged because of the relative abundance of pottery, belonging to an Early Iron Age expression, not previously found in any quantity south of the Tugela. Several small concentrations of pottery suggestive of pits as well as patches of shell midden suggested that economic information might also be available on excavation.

The consulting engineers, Geustyn, Forsyth and Joubert, the contractors and the National Roads Department were all sympathetic to the need for salvaging and agreed to halt the earthmoving programme for several days while excavations were carried out by a hastily gathered team from the Natal Museum together with other volunteers.

Mzonjani is the traditional name for the *umndeni* or 'ward' in which the site occurs. It was named after a former headman who lived there. We chose this name as the hill itself apparently has no name and we did not feel that the official name, Lot 36 1540, was appropriate.

THE ENVIRONMENT

The primary vegetation of this area, according to Moll (1976), would have been coastal forest. However, fires, bush clearance for cultivation and livestock grazing would even in Iron Age times have had considerable effect in reducing the amount of forest. By the early nineteenth century, for example, Champion (1967)

described, from this area between the Mngeni and Mdloti rivers, a mosaic of tall grassveld, patches of *Acacia* bush and forest trees. He makes the interesting observation that: 'The grass in some spots had grown very much to weeds and in other places was covered with patches of dark green grass evidently the sites of old huts and kraals whose people have probably been swept away by the tyranny of Chakka. The country is evidently capable of supporting a large population, and once doubtless did contain many people.'

Today the area is blanketed by sugar-cane, but forest and bush relics survive in a few places, including a few large Natal figs (*Ficus natalensis*) near the site.

The site itself is part of the coastal dune complex of Natal, belonging to the Berea Red Sand Member of the Bluff Formation (Kent, in press). It is near the inland margin and consists of red sand and clay to a considerable depth. The 450 ft (137 m) contour cuts through the site which is on the north-western part of the hilltop with a view to the north. Early Iron Age material was seen for 260 m along the freeway path. No doubt it also extends beyond the 100 m width of the road reserve on both sides, but nothing could be seen in the sugar-cane.

FIELDWORK

Earthmoving machinery had stripped top soil from the site to an irregular depth of from a few centimetres to more than a metre. An average of 14 readings gave a depth of 62 cm. Towards both ends of the site several metres of sand had already been removed, making it impossible to establish the precise limits of the occupation. However, the scatter of pottery on the verges as well as the steepening slopes beyond the recorded scatter (Fig. 1) suggest that it did not extend much further north or south. The settlement therefore covered at least two hectares and, since there is every reason to believe that it was wider than the freeway path, especially on the east side where the flat hilltop would have invited settlement, it was probably considerably larger.

At our initial visit we examined the scatter of material on the exposed surface and numbered what appeared to be the main concentration and features from 1 to 18 (Fig. 1). During the fieldwork numbers 8, 9, 12, 15, 17 and 18 proved too slight to be worth further investigation. Three other features were included, their positions being identified in relation to other fixed points, namely 7 m north of feature 2, 4 m south of feature 14 and 13 m north of the road chainage 31080, the latter being well to the north of the other features. We also made a surface collection of all rim and decorated sherds in the general scatter between the features. The great majority of the pottery collected is very distinctive and has been attributed to the Early Iron Age (EIA). A small proportion of the pottery, however, is typologically Late Iron Age (LIA) and, while some of this ware is scattered among the other sherds, several of the features proved to belong to a Late Iron Age occupation or occupations, which must have been on a smaller scale than the original one.

Several concentrations of EIA sherd, Nos 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10 and 11, turned out to be restricted to the exposed surface. Excavation a few centimetres into the sand beneath them proved barren. It seems likely that they were in partly disturbed context due to the earthmoving activities. A few LIA sherds were mixed with the

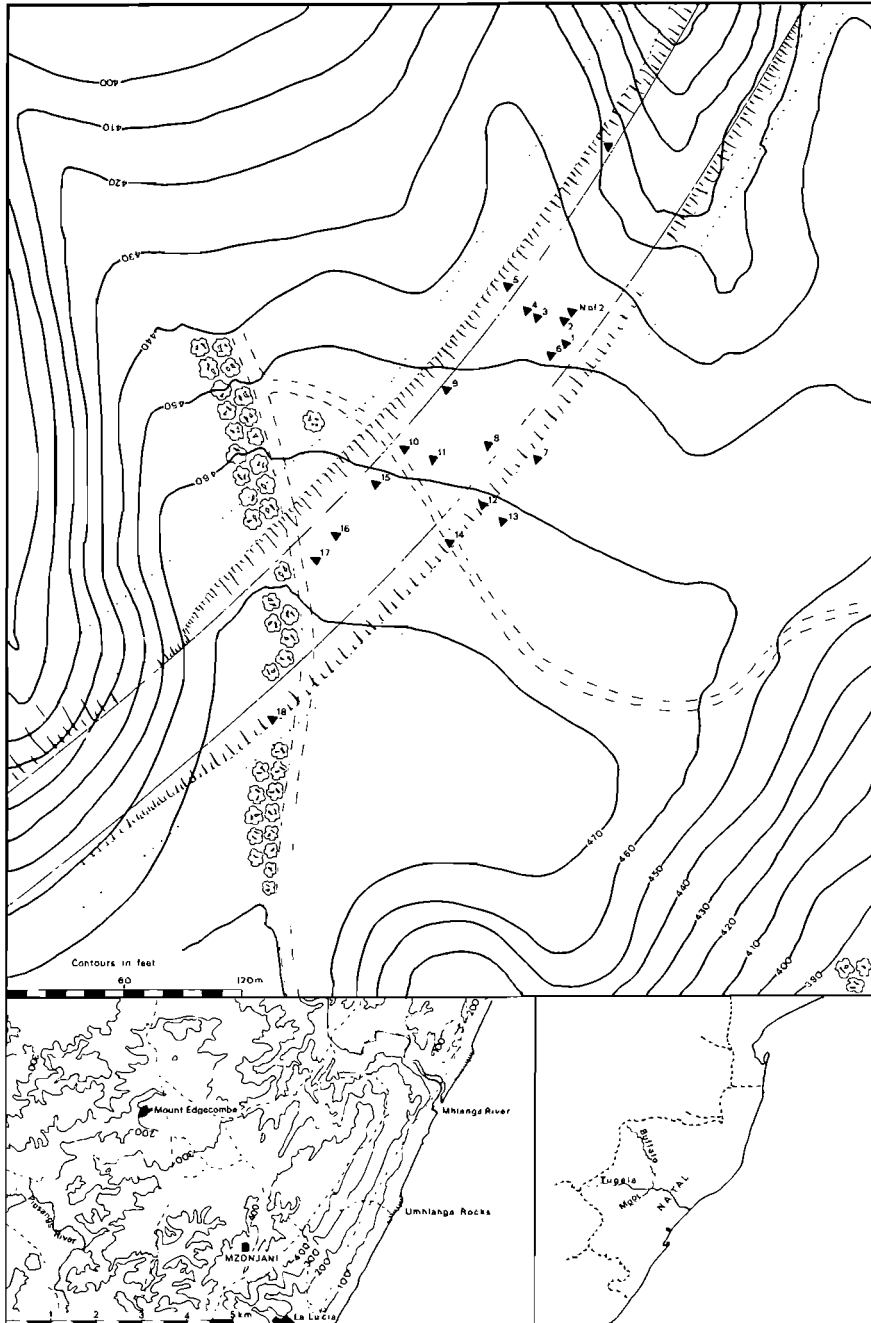


Fig. 1. The site and its location.

earlier material of features 1, 2, 11 and probably 4 and 6 as well. Other items of interest were a piece of red ochre from 1, an edge-ground sherd from 2 and the tip of a tuyère, partly vitrified, from 3. The surface material from each of these features was collected within a radius of 5 m from the marker pegs.

Of more importance are the features where EIA material was recovered from contexts that had not been disturbed by the road construction. Seven metres north of 2 a group of surface sherds suggested a buried feature. Two or three centimetres below the surface sand were the squashed remains of a bowl and pot. These had clearly been deliberately buried, the bowl being placed upside-down over the top of the pot as a lid. Since burial, collapse of the pot and compression in the sand had caused extensive fracturing of both vessels, aided more recently by the passing of a bulldozer track immediately over them. However, we have been able to reconstruct the two vessels completely (Fig. 4.2:7.2). Nothing remained to indicate whether the pot had any contents when it was buried, but the presence of the bowl as a lid would suggest that this was the case. The base of the pot would have been an estimated 75 cm below the ground surface prior to the road-working.

Feature 13 appeared similar to the other surface concentrations described above. A square of 1,5 m was put down over the concentration and excavated. There was very little pottery below 5 cm but a few sherds and scattered charcoal occurred down to about 20 cm. The excavation was extended a further 1,5 m to the south, again with little being found below the surface although one sherd was recovered at 75 cm. There was no sign of LIA contamination, although a piece of modern glass was found in the upper 3 cm. Four small pieces of iron slag were found between 3 and 10 cm.

The richest surface concentration was feature 14. There we excavated an area 4 × 3 m down to a depth of between 10 and 25 cm. The first few centimetres proved to be quite rich in both pottery and charcoal, but again there was no concentration at greater depth. Of interest were a piece of ochre and a ceramic fragment of what appears to be the horn of an animal figurine. Contamination was present in the form of a LIA sherd and a modern metal ball.

Four metres south-east of 14 was a small accumulation of pottery and charcoal about 1 m in diameter. Again this proved to be essentially a shallow feature of no more than about 5 cm, although one or two more sherds were found down to 35 cm.

Feature 16 was by far the richest, producing more material than all the others combined. It consisted of a mass of broken pottery tightly packed together, the sherds being more-or-less parallel to one another and from three to five layers thick. In plan it was irregularly oval, 2,30 by 1,20 m, and in section it was like a shallow dome, the top of which had been truncated by the bulldozer (Fig. 2). Below this scrape the material was clearly in primary archaeological context, indicating that it had been deliberately and fairly carefully laid down in a pit whose bottom was in the form of an oval dome. The ground surface is estimated to have been about 65 cm above the scrape, on the basis of surviving chunks of soil around near-by marker poles. This would give the feature a maximum depth of about 1 m.

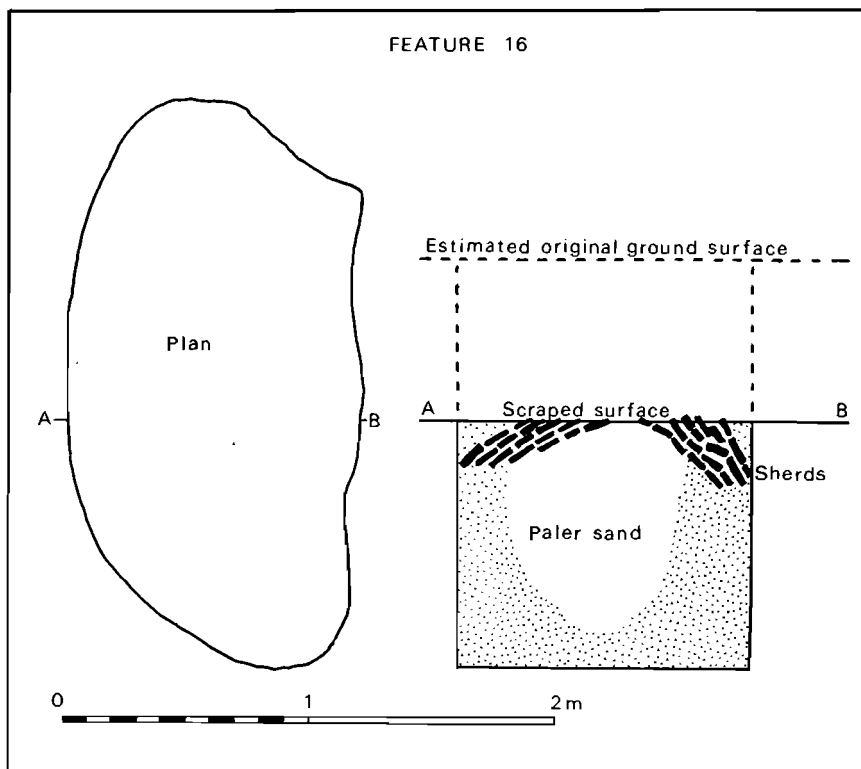


Fig. 2. Diagrammatic plan and section of Feature 16.

Among, and well sealed by, the densely packed sherds were greyish patches containing charcoal and contrasting with the buff-coloured sand of the site. A large sample of charcoal was collected from between 10 and 25 cm below the scrape. This gave a radiocarbon age of 1670 ± 40 (ad 280), Pta-1980. The size of the sample and its context would seem to make this a particularly reliable reading; calibration with dendro-chronological scales would make minimal difference at this period.

In the central part of the feature and extending beneath the pottery to some depth the sand was much paler in colour (Fig. 2). This could represent leaching of ash or other fine material from the pottery levels or alternatively it could mean that the pit had been deeper and was partly filled in before the pottery was laid down. Excavation was extended to a metre below the scraped surface but there was no further cultural material nor other indications as to the purpose of the feature.

The remaining features, namely 5, 7 and the northern feature 13 m beyond the chainage 31080, were associated with LIA pottery and are clearly much later in date than the EIA occupation. Both 5 and 7 were small patches of shell midden, essentially *Perna perna* (brown mussel), in dark soil. On the scraped surface EIA sherds were found but the excavations yielded sherds that all appear to be LIA

Both appear to have been small pits into which debris was dumped, No. 5 having two midden lenses separated by about 25 cm of brown sand containing a few large pieces of charcoal. The northern feature consisted merely of a small group of LIA sherds and part of a cattle mandible. Apart from these three features the LIA pottery was thinly scattered over the site with another surface scatter on the spur 250 m north of the site.

THE POTTERY

This section will be concerned mainly with the EIA pottery; a short description of the LIA ware has been included to demonstrate the contrast. The context of the sample is not ideal since much of it was collected on the surface after the top soil had been scraped away. However, the relative uniformity of the EIA material and the close resemblance between excavated and surface material indicates that it is a valid assemblage.

The description broadly follows the approach adopted previously for EIA material from Natal (Maggs & Michael, 1976). However, recent experience has shown the need to separate bowls from pots in the analysis, while most of the attributes have had to be changed because of the different nature of the Mzonjani assemblage.

A total of 89 pots and 43 bowls was included in the analysis, the criterion for the selection of pots being that they should at least be preserved down to the body/neck junction so as to show all the attributes of shape that were required, as well as neck decoration. Unfortunately, because body decoration in this assemblage is often discontinuous and widely spaced, many of the examples included were inadequate to record this attribute. Body decoration is therefore under-represented in the analysis displayed in the matrix and a separate list of decorated body sherds is given to compensate. Because of the soft fabric and the structural weakness of the body/neck junction, most vessels are broken at this point and except for the excavated vessels, relatively few could be restored.

The Mzonjani assemblage is by far the largest yet available from Natal for the period around AD 300, which represents the earliest expression of the EIA in this region. For this reason it is described in some detail and illustrated extensively below, before its relationship with other sites is considered. As far as possible pottery from the dated feature 16 has been selected for illustration.

Characteristics of the pots

Shape

1. Pot with relatively straight, everted neck and well defined point of inflection. The angle between body and neck is usually well marked (Fig. 4).
2. Pot with curved everted neck and less defined point of inflection. There is only one example in the assemblage (Fig. 6.7).
3. Lip profile rounded.
4. Lip profile flattened in a single plane.
5. Lip profile tapered.
6. Lip profile with two or more bevels (Fig. 6.10).
7. Groove on lip. This may be found on any of Nos 3–6 above.

Position of decoration

8. Whole of neck.
9. Upper neck.
10. Body/neck junction.
11. Just below (attached to) body/neck junction.
12. On body (not attached to body/neck junction).

Decoration motifs—continuous

13. Single horizontal groove (Fig. 3.2).
14. Band of several horizontal grooves (Fig. 6.8).
15. Band of oblique hatching (Fig. 3.1).
16. Two or more bands of oblique hatching. There is only one example in the assemblage (Fig. 5.3).
17. Band of horizontal and oblique cross-hatching (Fig. 6.3).
18. Horizontal row or rows of individual impressions (Fig. 3.3).
19. Band of interlocking triangles, hatched (Fig. 4.1).
20. Band of alternate (pendant) triangles, hatched (Fig. 6.2).
21. Band of interlocking rectangles, hatched alternately vertically and horizontally (Fig. 3.4).
22. Band of alternate rectangles, with vertical and horizontal cross-hatching (Fig. 6.6).
23. Band of interlocking parallelograms, hatched (Fig. 5.4).
24. Band of alternate parallelograms, hatched (Fig. 6.5).

Decorative motifs—discontinuous

25. Horizontal quadrilaterals, hatched (Fig. 5.8).
26. Oblique quadrilaterals, hatched (Fig. 4.2).
27. Short horizontal row or rows of impressions, usually along a groove. Unlike No. 18 above these do not extend around the vessel.
28. Short, vertical row or rows of impressions, usually along a groove (Fig. 6.1).
29. Wavy lines. These include any curvilinear motifs (Fig. 4.3).
30. Misc. decoration. This includes other, rare motifs as well as an example where the sherd was too small to determine the body decoration (Fig. 4.1).

With one noticeable exception (Fig. 6.7) the pots all have fairly straight, everted necks varying from 1,5 to 4,8 cm high. Bodies are spherical to subspherical in shape sometimes with rather straight or even slightly concave shoulders making them somewhat bag-shaped. Most lip profiles are rounded or flattened with a single bevel; however, five have more than one bevel (Fig. 6.10). A single groove quite commonly occurs on the lip.

Most pots are decorated, only 11 of the 88 being plain. Decoration, if present, always occurs on the neck of the pot and may also occur on the body. The great majority of neck decoration is made up of two motifs, a single groove just below the lip (13) or a band of oblique hatching (15). The other continuous motifs (14 and 16–24) are relatively uncommon but of interest in providing links with other assemblages separated from Mzonjani in time and space.

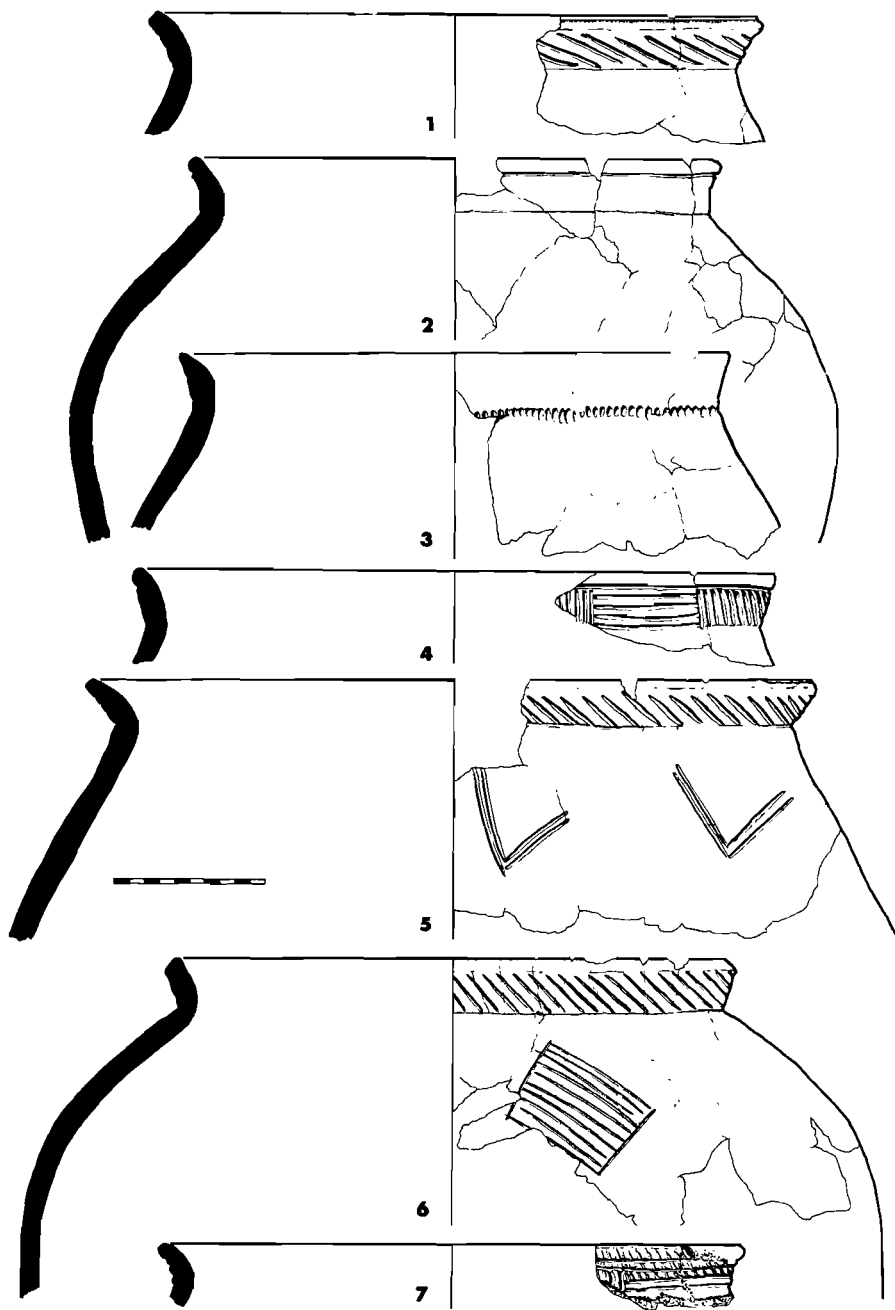


Fig. 3. Early Iron Age pots from Feature 16; 7 from surface collection.

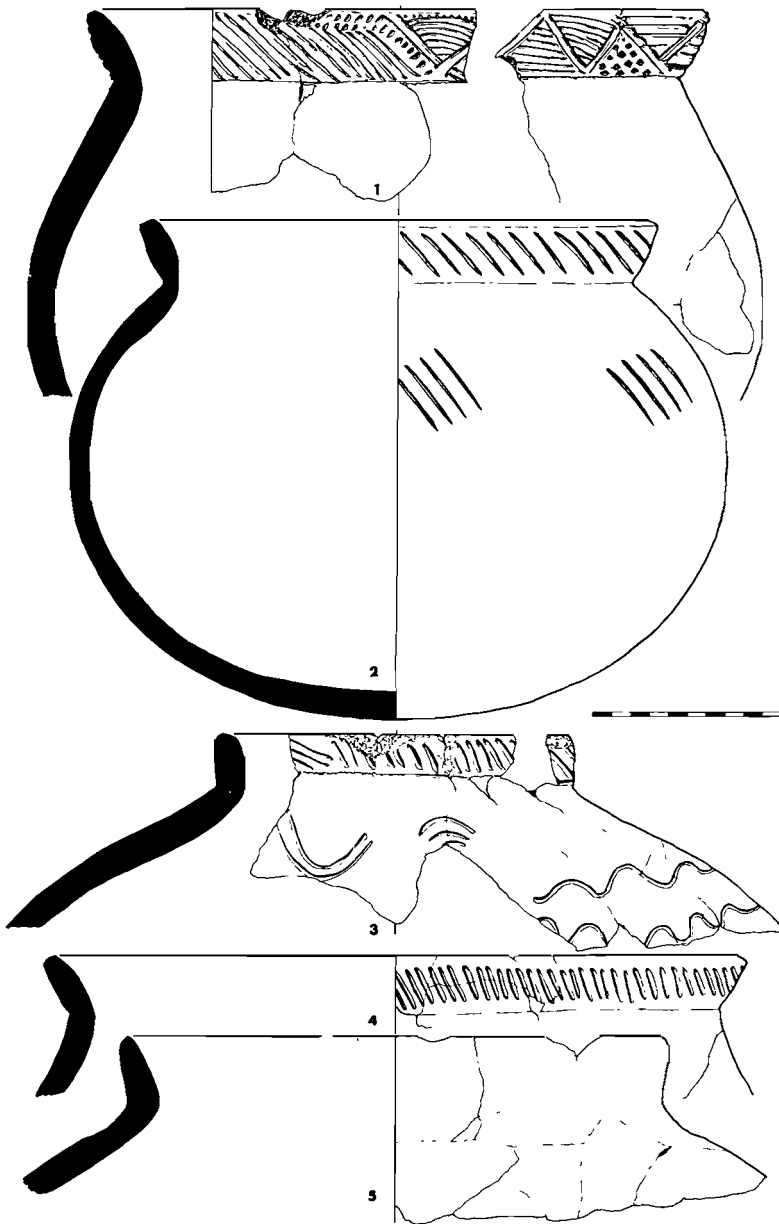


Fig. 4. Early Iron Age pots from Feature 16; 2 from north of Feature 2.

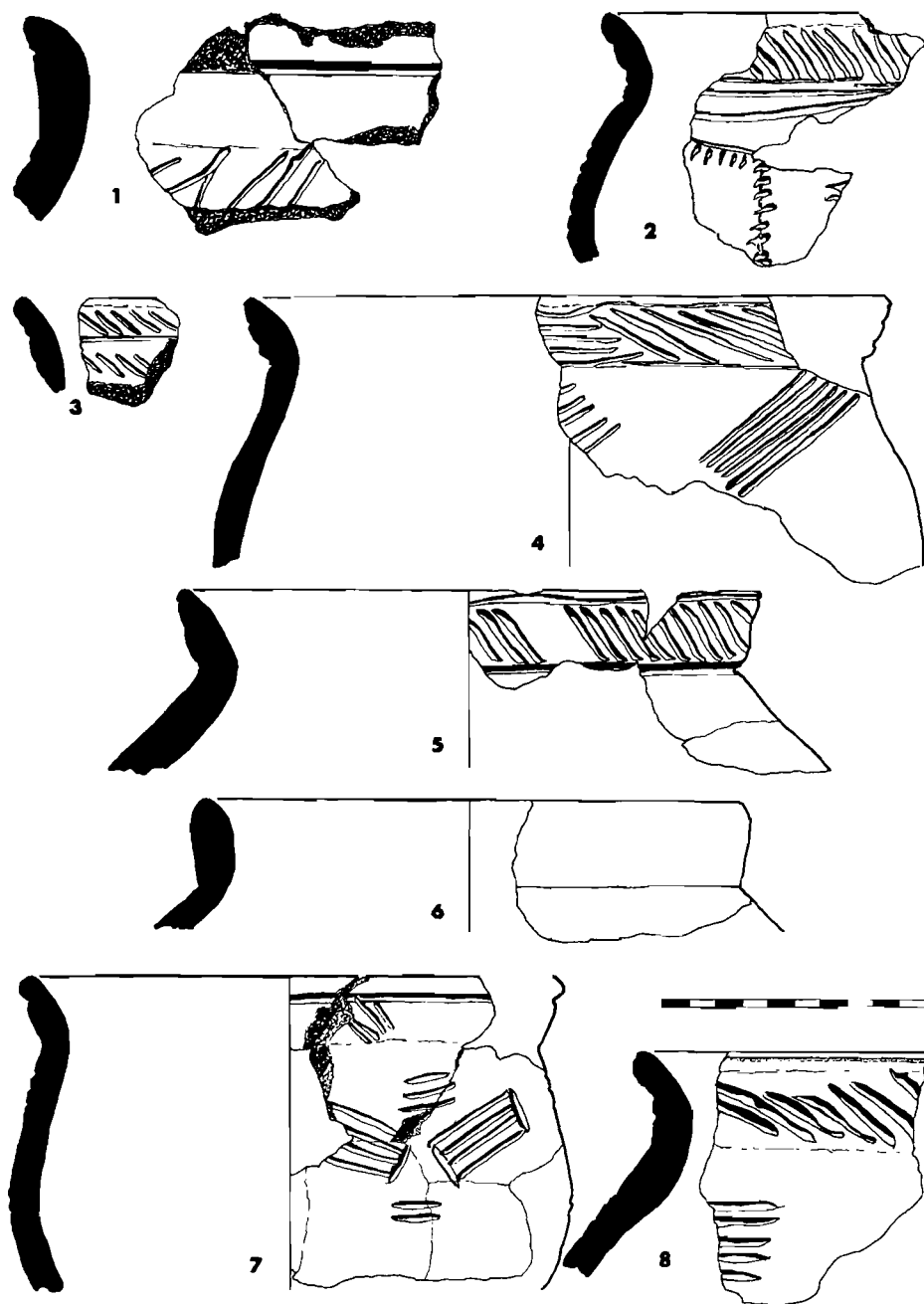


Fig. 5. Early Iron Age pots, 1 from north of Feature 2; 2 & 3 Feature 4; 4 Feature 14; 5-8 Feature 16.

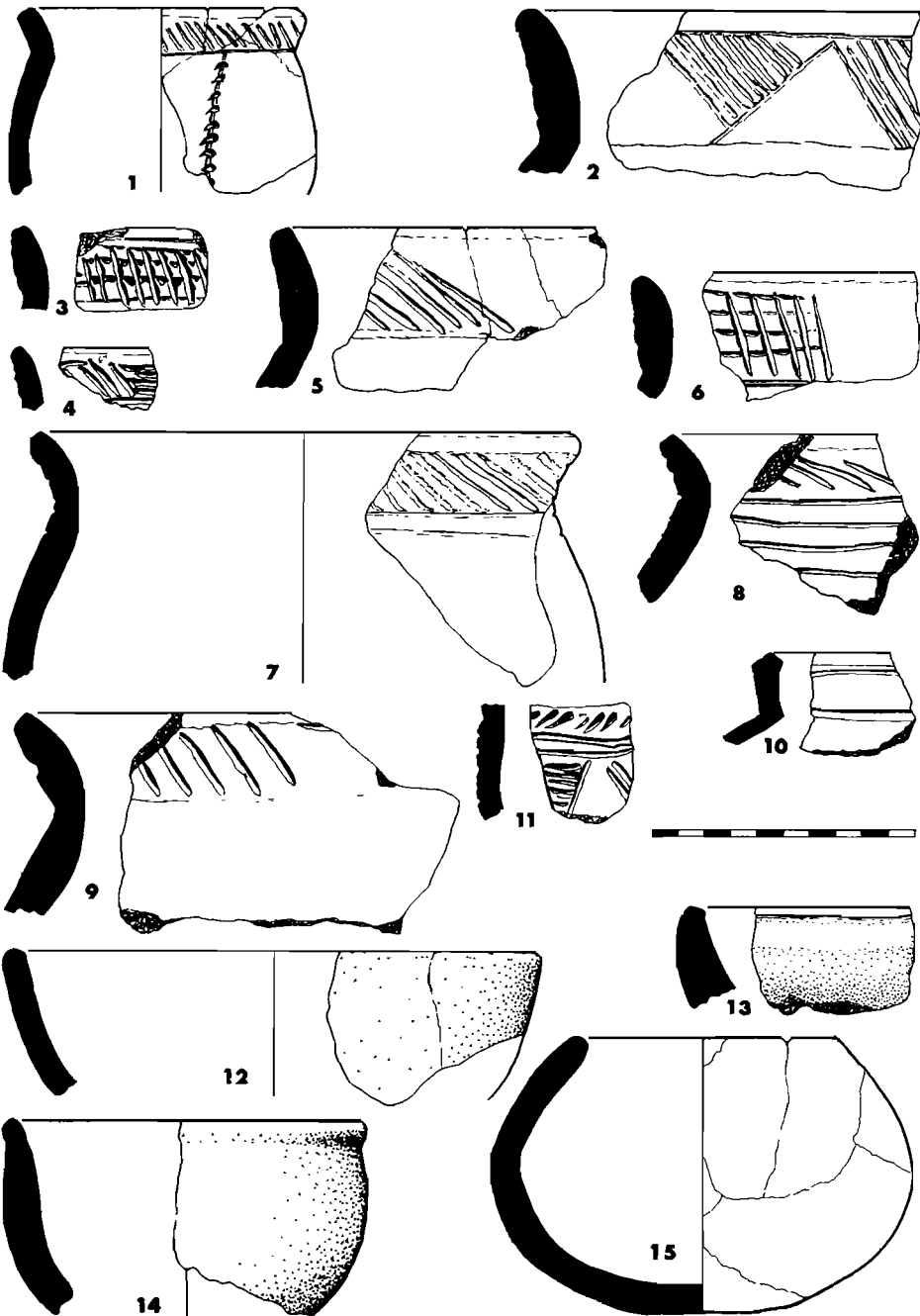


Fig. 6. Early Iron Age pots and bowls, 1-5, 14 & 15 from Feature 16; 11 Feature 14; 6-10, 12 & 13 surface collection.

TABLE 1.

Matrix of characteristics of the pots.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
1																														
2																														
3	44	1																												
4	38																													
5	1																													
6	5																													
7	10		6	1		3																								
8	59	1	31	26		3	5																							
9	17		8	6	1	2	4																							
10	11	1	6	5		1	2	8	3																					
11	7		7			1	5	2																						
12	9		6	3		1	9		1	1																				
13	35	1	21	12	1	2	4	20	16	11	3	3																		
14	5		3	2		1	4	1	1	2	1																			
15	39	1	15	22		3	6	39	1	4	4	7	9	3																
16	1		1					1																						
17	3		2	1			3							1																
18	1		1			1				1																				
19	1			1				1								1														
20	1		1					1		1				1																
21	2		2					2						2																
22	1		1					1		1				1																
23	7		6	1				7		1	1	1	4																	
24	4		2	2				4		1			3																	
25	2		2				1	2				2	1			1														
26	8		5	2		1		7	1		2	5	4										2		1					
27	2		1	1				2			1	1								1										
28	3		3					3			3	1															1	1		
29	1		1					1				1																		
30	4		2	2				3	1	1	1	2	3		2					1					1	1	1			
Totals	88	1	45	38	1	5	10	60	17	12	7	9	36	5	40	1	3	1	1	1	2	1	7	4	2	8	2	3	1	4

Body decoration is less frequent than neck decoration but not as rare as the matrix (Table 1) suggests. It is often discontinuous but may form a complete band around the vessel. It may be attached to the body/neck junction or it may be lower on the body, the latter position being the more common. Hatched quadrilaterals are the most common motif, and they are more often set obliquely than horizontally (Fig. 5.4 & 5.8). Other discontinuous motifs include short rows of impressions and wavy lines (Figs. 5.2 & 4.3) as well as a single example of V's (Fig. 3.5) and combinations of quadrilaterals (Fig. 5.7) placed under 'misc. decoration' because of their rarity. The list of motifs on decorated body sherds not included in the matrix because they lacked necks is as follows:

Motif No.	Frequency	Fig.
14 Band of several horizontal grooves	12	6.8
15 Band of oblique hatching	1	5.1
20 Band of alternate triangles, hatched	4	6.11
25 Horizontal quadrilaterals, hatched	11	5.8
26 Oblique quadrilaterals, hatched	14	3.6
27 Horizontal row or rows of impressions	10	5.2
28 Vertical row or rows of impressions	4	6.1
29 Wavy lines	4	4.3
— Chevron	8	
— V's	5	3.5

This list presents a picture of the body decoration rather different from that implied by the matrix. While the hatched quadrilaterals (Nos 25 & 26) still dominate, other motifs (Nos 14, 20, 27, 28 as well as chevrons and V's) appear in some numbers and sometimes in combination with one another. For example there are several cases where a row of alternate hatched triangles or a chevron occur immediately below a band of horizontal grooves (Fig. 6.11). Another interesting feature is that while most of the decoration that is not attached to the body/neck junction is discontinuous, there is one example of a continuous band of decoration around the body of the pot. Both features are more characteristic of sites such as Msuluzi Confluence (Maggs, 1980) which are two or three centuries later than Mzonjani.

Bowls represent about one-third of the assemblage and although they are simpler than the pots they are fairly distinctive. Since most of their attributes are different from those of the pots, a separate matrix with different characteristics was drawn up (Table 2).

Characteristics of the bowls

Shape

1. Subcarinated, thickened. The outer wall of the bowl curves sharply inwards a little distance below the lip. Since the inner wall curves more gradually the wall at the 'carination' is thicker (Fig. 7.5).
2. Subcarinated, not thickened. There is only one example (Fig. 7.3).
3. Hemispherical, widemouthed (Fig. 6.12).
4. Subspherical (Fig. 6.15).

5. Lip profile rounded.
6. Lip profile flattened in a single plane.
7. Lip profile tapered.
8. Groove or flute on lip.

Decoration

9. Horizontal groove below 'carination' (Fig. 7.2).
10. Horizontal row or rows of individual impressions, usually along a groove (Fig. 7.10 & 7.11).

TABLE 2.

Matrix of characteristics of the bowls.										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1										
2										
3										
4										
5	16	2	8	1						
6	5		5							
7	6									
8	3		1			1				
9	9		1		4	3	2			
10	4				2		1		3	
Totals	28	1	13	1	25	9	6	4	9	4

The 'subcarinated, thickened' bowls dominate as is the case on comparable third- to fourth-century EIA sites. However, other shapes, notably hemispherical, are also found. Decoration, limited to two motifs occurring just below the 'carination', is found on about one-third of the subcarinated bowls and not on the other shapes. Lip profiles are mainly rounded and occasionally there is a slight groove on the lip. However, none has multiple bevels or fluting.

Wherever possible the diameters of both pots and bowls were recorded. The measurements in centimetres, taken at the outside of the lip, are as follows:

	Smallest	Mean	Largest	Standard deviation
Pots	10	26,8	46	10,2
Bowls	10	25,7	44	10

The two types of vessel are remarkably similar in size and on average larger than in some EIA assemblages such as Ntshekane of the ninth century from Natal (Maggs & Michael, 1976).

Other characteristics of the EIA assemblage as a whole relate to surface finish and fabric. The absence of burnish or any additional surface colouring is noticeable. Vessels were smoothed off but, it seems, never polished to a shiny lustre. They were made from material which consists largely of fine sand with relatively little clay and a fair amount of organic material. Firing was to a low temperature for carbonised material has discoloured the core of most sherds from just beneath their outer surfaces and many have dark grey or black surfaces as well. The fabric has a rather poor refractory quality, being both friable on the surface and often fissile—tending to shatter along planes of weakness. A sample fired in an electric kiln to about 900° C changed from black to orange, with combustion of organic

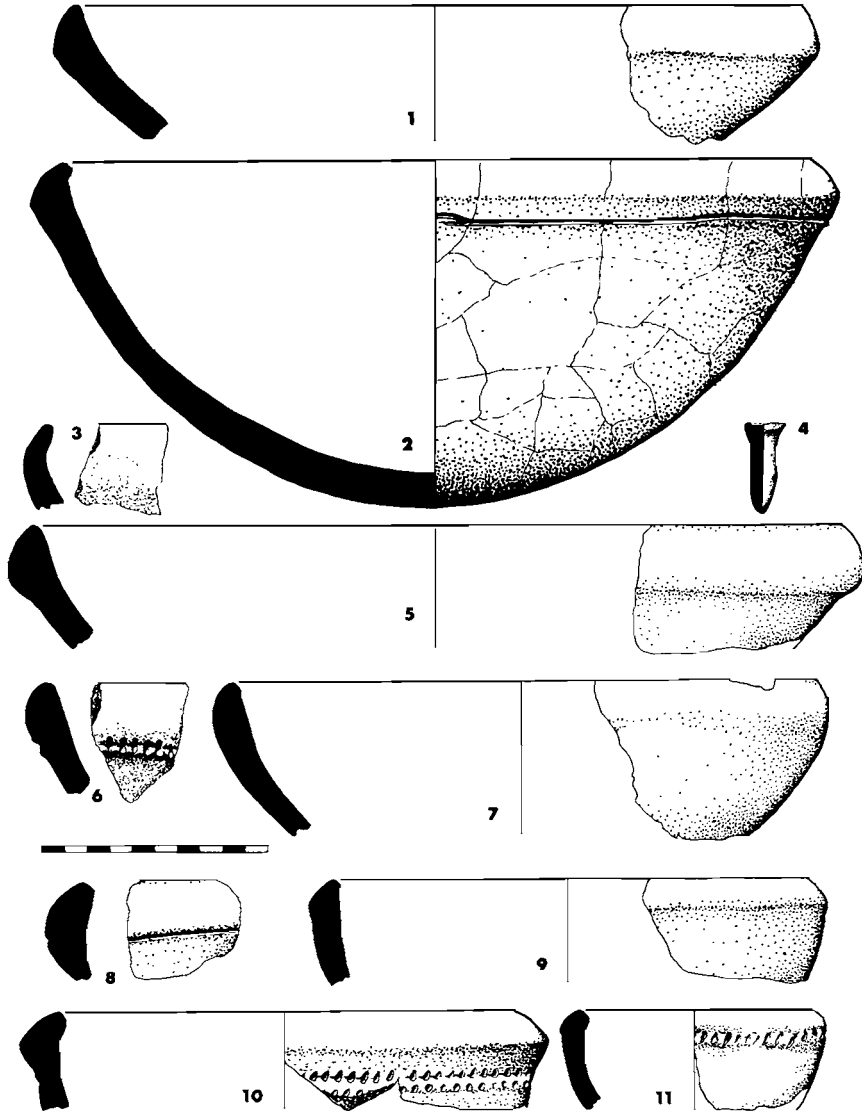


Fig. 7. Early Iron Age bowls, 1 & 2 from north of Feature 2; 3 Feature 4; 5 Feature 13; 4 'golf tee' & 6-8 Feature 16; 9-11 surface collection.

content, and became very fissile. It therefore seems that the low firing was optimal for this rather poor material. The fine sand element suggests a local origin in the aeolian Berea Red Sand Formation; the organic content suggests a poorly drained valley-bottom source.

In summary the EIA assemblage is characterised by rather soft, friable and low-fired ware without burnish. Pots have markedly everted, straight necks with sharply defined points of inflection. Most necks are decorated, the most common

motifs being a horizontal groove just below the lip and a band of oblique hatching. Body decoration is less common, the most frequent motif being hatched quadrilaterals. There is a considerable variety of other decoration, both on necks and bodies, most of which consists of relatively bold grooving. The distinctive bowls are subcarinated and relatively open in shape, sometimes with a single horizontal groove or row of impressions just below the 'carination'.

Late Iron Age Pottery

This material is distinguishable from the earlier assemblage on the basis of fabric, thickness, surface treatment, shape and, where present, decoration. However, it is not always possible to assign particular sherds to one or other assemblage. The fabric is harder and usually less sandy; sometimes it is actually gritty. The LIA ware is on average thinner, especially near the lip. Samples of rim sherds from the two assemblages were measured for thickness at a distance of two centimetres below the lip with the following results in millimetres:

	Thinnest	Mean	Thickest	Standard deviation
LIA n = 39	6	9,6	14	2,25
EIA n = 110	7	12,3	18	2,95

Several sherds, most of them decorated, have a red ochre burnish. Decoration is confined to a row of notches or impressions on the lip; in one case there are two rows. Vessels are U-shaped or bag-shaped, sometimes with slight necks with very poorly defined points of inflection. The affinities of this ware are with such LIA assemblages as Blackburn (Davies, 1971), a mere 6 km to the north, Mpambanyoni (Robey, 1980) another coastal site and Moor Park 140 km inland, near Estcourt (Davies, 1974). The later occupation of Mzonjani therefore probably dates to one or more episode during the first five centuries of this millennium, approximately a thousand years later than the EIA occupation.

Apart from the material described above and the faunal remains discussed below little else was recovered from the site. Scattered surface finds include four upper grindstones probably of LIA pattern, two hammerstones, several stone manuports, one of coral and two pieces of iron. One of the latter was probably the tang of a hoe, the other being too small and corroded to determine its original shape. An enigmatic ceramic object shaped like a golf tee was associated with the pottery from feature 16 (Fig. 7.4).

THE OCCUPATION

The distribution of Early Iron Age material reflects a village of some size. Feature 16 and the pot covered by the bowl indicate that already at this time pits were a part of local EIA settlements, together with the practice of carefully burying pots—presumably for ritual rather than practical reasons. However, the base of the pot was intact and not deliberately broken away as was the case with the seventh-century examples from Msuluzi Confluence (Maggs, 1980).

Nothing is known of above-ground structures but the occupation must have been over a considerable period, perhaps several decades, in view of the quantity

of material. The concentration of pottery around 13 and 14 show material apparently in archaeological context but more diffused through the sandy soil than, for example, 16. They could reflect relatively shallow refuse pits into which small quantities of domestic debris were tipped as they silted up with the sandy soil. Or alternatively they could reflect mobility of material, chiefly sherds and charcoal, within the soil profile due to physical, biotic or some other unknown factors. In the latter case, concentrations of material on the occupation surface might have worked their way down through the upper half metre or so of sandy soil, a process that would have involved little lateral movement. The absence of EIA sherds from exposed areas, such as the freeway verges and tracks, which had not actually been bulldozed, suggests that there has been some tendency for material to sink beneath the soil surface. However, since there clearly was some pit digging, this factor may also be significant in explaining the occurrence.

The poor preservation of organic material means that little can be said about the economy. The relatively small number of identified faunal remains are listed in the appendices. The evidence indicates that cattle may have been present during the EIA, but neither the identification nor the context is sufficiently secure for confirmation. Likewise the gathering of shellfish cannot be confirmed for the EIA occupation at this site. However, a village of several hectares suggests food production, particularly agriculture, to sustain it. Hunting, trapping and the gathering of shellfish as well as wild plant foods can be surmised on the basis of the local environment. The tuyère fragments from 3 and the pieces of slag excavated from 13, both contexts uncontaminated by LIA material, imply small scale iron-smelting on site.

The site falls within the estimated extent of the coastal forest (Moll, 1976), but it is possible that on a sandy hilltop such as this a more open woodland or even a grassy parkland may have occurred. A patch of open vegetation may have been a factor in attracting settlement. More land may then have been cleared to provide space for cultivation as well as wood for building and fuel. If cultivation provided the bulk of the diet, further clearance would be needed as the first fields declined in productivity because of the relatively poor soil. This process of clearing around villages presumably started with the arrival of the first Iron Age communities, of whom the Mzonjani inhabitants seem to be representative. Continuation of the process throughout the Iron Age led to the mosaic of tall grassveld, *Acacia* bush and forest patches observed by Champion (1967) in 1836.

RELATED SITES IN NATAL

The earliest reference to pottery similar to the Mzonjani EIA assemblage, and indeed perhaps the earliest reference to EIA pottery in southern Africa, is in Anderson's 1904 geological report on the St. Lucia area of the Zululand coast. His pottery description, though brief, is sufficient to identify pots with similar decorated necks which came from a shell midden on the coast south of Cape Vidal.

The first detailed description and classification of this kind of pottery was in Schofield's work on the Natal coast in the region of Durban. Like Anderson he recognised its considerable age from its context, notably at the Durban North

Reservoir where it came from a depth of 2 to 3 metres (Schofield, 1935). Initially he included this ware in his class NC2, which we now recognise as LIA. A year or two later, however (Schofield, 1937), he noted a tendency for the two kinds of pottery to occur on different sites, although sometimes they were mixed. 'We feel that this class is really distinct from Class NC2 because . . . on other sites from which the flared neck (EIA) types have been recovered, the crenulated rims, and pots with moulded surface decoration (LIA), have been absent.' He therefore established the term NC2a for material including both pots and bowls like those from Mzonjani, but he also included vessels from the inland sites of Colenso and Cathkin Peak which have no resemblance to the EIA ware.

Schofield always regarded his NC2 as similar to Buispoort (Van Hoepen & Hoffman, 1935) in the western Transvaal and other Highveld pottery. Inexplicably, he continued to see a close resemblance between his NC2a and Buispoort, even after he recognised the contrast between NC2 and NC2a. In 1938 he compared the Glenwood High School, Durban, assemblage, which has typical Mzonjani vessels, with Buispoort, even suggesting a Sotho origin. Again in his major work of 1948 he stresses a particularly close comparison between NC2a (which he now calls NC2D) and Buispoort. Present evidence shows that this comparison is quite unjustified since there is virtually nothing in common between the two. Buispoort pots have less developed necks with poorly defined points of inflection, and some have no necks at all. None of the subcarinated bowls so typical of Mzonjani is reported. When it comes to decoration, *none* of the motifs on the Natal material occurs on the illustrated sherds from Buispoort. What then was the reason for Schofield's belief that the two were closely related? It seems to

Fig. 8. Map showing related Early Iron Age sites.

No. on Map	Site name or No.	Authority	Natal Museum Catalogue
1	Mzonjani	Maggs	77/31
2	Durban North Old Reservoir	Schofield, 1935 etc.	
3	Glenwood High School	Schofield, 1938	
4	Mdloti Dune Site No. 2	Schofield, 1935	
5	Tongaat Monastery	Schofield, 1937	
6	Merebank	Schoute-Vanneck & Walsh, 1960	
7	Bluff (G)	Schoute-Vanneck, 1958	
8	Whitfield Drive	Natal Mus. site record	75/65
9	St Lucia C4	Hall in prep.	76/32, 77/34
10	St Lucia C10	Hall in prep.	77/38
11	St Lucia C11	Hall in prep.	77/39
12	St Lucia C13	Hall in prep.	77/41
13	St Lucia C14	Hall in prep.	77/42
14	St Lucia C15	Hall in prep.	77/43
15	St Lucia C16	Hall in prep.	77/44
16	St Lucia C18	Hall in prep.	77/46
17	St Lucia C20	Hall in prep.	77/48
18	St Lucia C21	Hall in prep.	76/38, 76/39, 76/40
19	St Lucia C22	Hall in prep.	77/49
20	St Lucia C31	Hall in prep.	77/56
21	St Lucia C68—Enkwazini	Hall & Vogel, 1978; Hall, 1980	76/43, 76/49
22	St Lucia C69	Hall in prep.	76/44

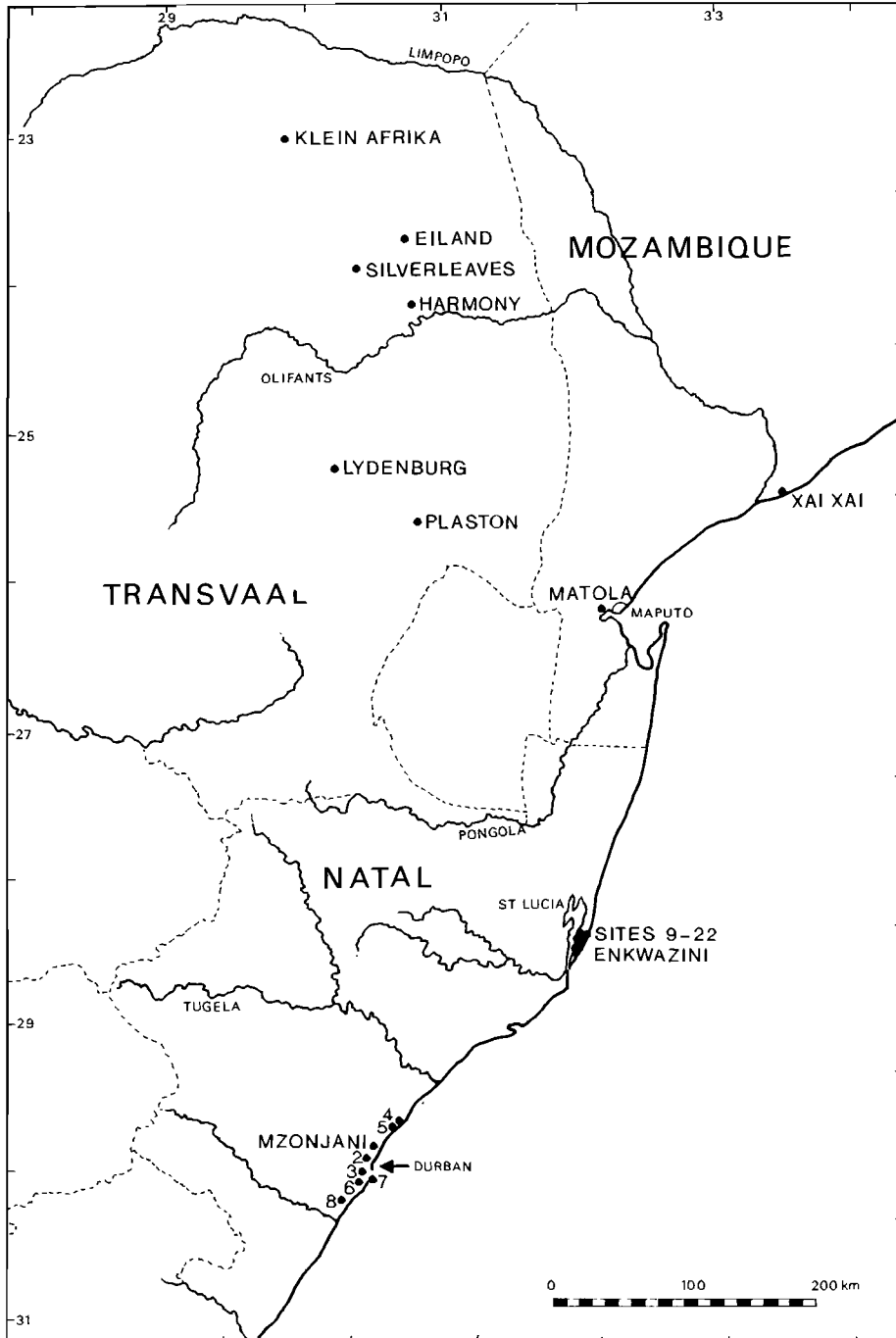


Fig. 8.

me that he must have confused the band of broad, oblique hatching on the neck, so typical of the Natal material, with the row of notches or individual impressions on the lip, which is characteristic not only of Buispoort but many other LIA assemblages, including Schofield's NC2 and our LIA material from Mzonjani. Indeed he claims (1948: 156) that notched lips are characteristic of NC2a, and illustrates a pot from Natal which does have this decoration, but it is a bag-shaped vessel quite unlike the others of his class NC2a and almost certainly belonging to the LIA (1948: pl. 8, 20).

While we can still accept that there may be some general similarity between Schofield's NC2 and Highveld assemblages such as Buispoort, this is manifestly not the case with his NC2a. The latter is clearly EIA and more closely related to his NC3 than NC2, but for the odd vessels, apparently of LIA type, that he erroneously attributed to his NC2a.

Four of Schofield's sites can be attributed to the Mzonjani expression of the EIA. These include the Durban North Reservoir and Glenwood High School sites already mentioned as well as Mdloti Dune Site No. 2 and Tongaat Monastery (Fig. 8). Other material he attributes to his NC2a is inadequately described or illustrated for the attribution to be accepted.

Subsequent work has produced three more sites in the Durban area; Merebank (Schoute-Vanneck & Walsh, 1960), Bluff G (Schoute-Vanneck, 1958) and Whitfield Drive in St. Winifreds, the most southerly assemblage of this kind yet recorded. Both Merebank and Whitfield Drive were associated with small shell middens and were fairly extensive, the former some 2,5 hectares and the latter around 200 m in length, much the same size as Mzonjani. All these assemblages are small but are characterised by the pots with straight, everted necks, well-defined points of inflection and a band of bold, oblique hatching on the neck. Such vessels alone are sufficient to identify assemblages of this kind since assemblages from the seventh century and later in Natal do not include this combination of attributes (Maggs, 1980).

Recent intensive work in the St. Lucia area by Hall (1980) and Hall & Vogel (1978) following reconnaissance by Davies (site reports in the Natal Museum) has produced a cluster of 14 sites in the area of Anderson's original report.

One of these, Enkwazini, yielded the first excavated and dated sample of this pottery; the fourth-century age being confirmed by the late third-century reading from Mzonjani. Shapes of pots and bowls are like those already described and decoration is again dominated by motifs 13 and 15 on pot necks. Several other motifs also occur (Hall, 1980); however, the St. Lucia assemblages, being relatively small, do not have as wide a range of decoration as Mzonjani.

The 22 known sites in Natal fall within two clusters, around Durban and on the eastern shores of St. Lucia (Fig. 8). Clearly this pattern reflects unequal archaeological sampling and not a complete distribution pattern, but some interesting points emerge. We can safely assume that there are sites still to be recorded between the two clusters and further north, along the coast, since the landscape is much the same. All sites occur within the cordon of Pleistocene dunes of the Bluff Formation which extend down the coast, becoming narrower southwards.

The cordon is continuous down to about the area of our southernmost site, Whitfield Drive, but further south it occurs only as isolated and much narrower patches of red sand. Furthermore, 19 of the 22 sites are within 3 km of the shore, some being much closer; the remaining three in the St. Lucia area being within 6 km of the shore. While other sites may well be found further south, the preference for an environment of coastal forest on ancient dunes as well as proximity to the shore seems clear. Despite the paucity of information on the economy, this pattern enables us to take the first steps towards understanding their ecology. It seems that shellfish and perhaps other marine organisms provided a significant proportion of the protein diet. The light and well-drained sandy soil may have been particularly suited to the form of agriculture once the forest cover had been cleared, perhaps largely by the use of fire. The susceptibility of the soil to rapid leaching would presumably have necessitated slash-and-burn methods with frequent changes of plots to maintain crop productivity. It is even possible that this might have led to erosion in the immediate vicinity of settlements with the removal of vegetation and destabilisation of the aeolian sands. This could partly explain the depth below modern surface that much of the pottery has been found, for example 2–3 metres at the Durban North Reservoir, 1.5 m at Glenwood High School and 1 m at Enkwazini.

RELATED SITES FURTHER NORTH

North of Natal the assemblage that most closely resembles our material is undoubtedly Matola IV, near Maputo (Da Cruz e Silva, 1976). Pot shapes and decoration agree very closely with Mzonjani, with a preference for motifs 13 and 15 on necks and discontinuous ones on bodies. Some of the simpler bowls are also very similar; however, examples with horizontal fluting below their lips have not been found on Natal sites. There may be a rather higher incidence of multiple bevelling and rows of individual impressions, but in general the resemblance is close. Interestingly the site is also on stabilised red sands and it is a fair-sized settlement with shell middens close to the shore.

Matola IV and related sites in southern Mozambique have been assigned to De Senna Martinez's (1976) second pottery phase in this region. Much of the material included in his Phase 2 is very similar to the earliest expression of the EIA in Natal, indicating a close relationship, particularly with sites such as Xai Xai IV–VII which are shell middens just north of the Limpopo mouth (Fig. 8). However, other Phase 2 assemblages include vessels which are typologically closer to material of a later date in the Natal sequence—some of the seventh century, within the EIA, and some to the LIA. We therefore cannot equate all of Phase 2 with the earliest expression in Natal on typological grounds, and as no dates are yet available for the Mozambique sites we cannot be sure of their chronology. However, Matola IV and Xai Xai sites, at least, will almost certainly prove to belong to the beginning of the EIA in southern Mozambique at around the third century AD.

Comparison can also be made with EIA sites in the eastern Transvaal, especially those dated before about 500 AD—Silver Leaves (Klapwijk, 1974) and

Eiland (Evers, 1975). These sites are characterised by Evers's (1977) pottery class Ia, which are pots with straight everted necks, well-defined points of inflection and decoration in motifs and positions which are often the same or similar to the Natal examples. As at Matola IV, some bowls are like our subcarinated ones (Evers's class IIb) but others are fluted, especially at Silver Leaves (Evers's class IIa). Other differences include the presence of tall, vertical necked pots (Evers's class III) and a much greater incidence of impressed decorative motifs in most of the Transvaal assemblages. But there is certainly much in common with Mzonjani.

Evers (1977a) has argued that these and other eastern Transvaal sites, including Lydenburg, Plaston and Klingbeil, dating to the period 450–800 AD, belong to 'a widespread Early Iron Age culture present in the eastern Transvaal'; although elsewhere (Evers, 1977b) he sees Plaston and Lydenburg as rather distinct from the Silver Leaves–Eiland–Matola group. In this connection it is interesting to note that there are still close parallels between Mzonjani and some of the vessels from Lydenburg and even the seventh-century Plaston site, although the majority are typologically different (eg. Evers's classes IIc, III, V–IX). By the late eighth century at Klingbeil the pottery has very little in common.

Evers (1977a) has tended to look for synchronic differences on a geographical basis within the eastern Transvaal, without considering the significance of diachronic changes in typology. He finds a 'widespread EIA culture' spanning the whole of the period 300–800 AD, but considers that 'some features may serve to differentiate' his three areas.

In Natal the EIA sequence shows marked diachronic change, to the extent that on the basis of typology alone we are able to estimate the date of assemblages to within about a century of their radiocarbon ages. Under these circumstances diachronic change within the EIA *must* be taken into account when making comparisons between sites and regions. It is clear that by about 500 AD, in both the Transvaal and Natal, sufficient typological change had taken place to produce assemblages different from the earliest expressions in these regions. The differences between the regions may have increased with time, especially if developments took place regionally. If we are interested in understanding the initial spread of the EIA, it is therefore essential that we should document its earliest expression in each region in great detail.

The evidence discussed above presents a picture of considerable ceramic affinity between sites of the third and fourth centuries, spread over a wide area from the north-eastern Transvaal to the Limpopo mouth to the Natal south coast. The Natal sites lack the fluted bowls of Silver Leaves and Matola, and have less in the way of multiple bevelling and impressed decoration. The differences set them a little apart from, but certainly within the same tradition as the Transvaal and Mozambique sites. Perhaps the most appropriate name for this would be the Matola tradition, for this site provides the closest link between the Transvaal, Mozambique and Natal.

The only third/fourth-century published site south of the Limpopo which does not belong within this tradition is Klein Afrika in the northern Transvaal, which is regarded as closely related to the Gokomere Industry of Zimbabwe (Prinsloo,

1974). Some of the characteristics which differentiate this assemblage are curved everted necks, decorated rim bands, graphite burnish, comb-stamping and multiple bands of decoration.

Looking further afield, there seems to be general agreement that sites of this (Matola) tradition have a general affinity with the eastern African EIA, particularly the Kwale Industry and also Nkope of Malawi rather than more inland expressions (eg. Klapwijk, 1974; Da Cruz e Silva, 1976; De Senna Martinez, 1976; Evers, 1977; Phillipson, 1977; Inskeep, 1978; Maggs, 1977). Dates for Kwale assemblages in unmixed contexts fall within the second and third centuries AD. While it is by no means certain that Kwale was the direct origin of our tradition, present evidence suggests it as the most likely ancestor. If this was the case, a movement from the Kenya–north Tanzania coastal region as far as the south coast of Natal, a distance of some 3 200 km, may have taken place in as little as 150 years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Dick Prendergast for finding the site, Gordon and Di Bulter for helping us throughout the fieldwork, Strachan Construction, Geustyn, Forsyth and Joubert and the Department of National Roads for delaying the road construction and providing help on site. Marilyn Cherry, Oliver Davies, Kathleen Mack, Valerie Maggs, Pam and Ed Raine, Sue Reynders and other volunteers helped with fieldwork. Janet MacKay, Kathleen Mack and Valerie Ward worked on the preparation of the material for publication. Financial support from the Human Sciences Research Council and the Natal Museum is gratefully acknowledged.

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Date received: 4 December 1979.

APPENDIX 1

MAMMALIAN REMAINS FROM MZONJANI

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A very small sample of 27 pieces of bone was submitted for identification to the Department of Archaeozoology by Dr T. Maggs (Table 1). Mzonjani is an exceptional site in that the earlier component has been dated to the third century AD; unfortunately only two of the faunal fragments were associated with Early Iron Age pottery.

The Early Iron Age sample consisted of two tooth fragments. Both came from relatively large teeth; the form and texture of the fragments suggested that they might have come from *Bos taurus* teeth. However, neither fragment was large enough to be able to unequivocally assign it to this species, so that undeniable evidence for the presence of domesticated cattle in this early period of the Natal Iron Age is still lacking.

The Late Iron Age sample certainly contained good evidence for the presence of domesticated animals. A minimum of two individuals belonging to *Bos taurus* was present. The deciduous incisor in Feature 5 would have come from an animal between 15 and 24 months old, i.e. sub-adult. The molars and premolars from the feature 13 m from 31080, however, came from an adult breeding animal more than 42 months old. These figures were obtained using the ageing criteria suggested by Voigt (1978).

The two fragments of bone assigned to the Bov. II size class (23-84 kg; Brain, 1974: 2) could have come from domesticated sheep or goat.

The presence of *Cephalophus monticola* indicates hunting or snaring activities in forested or thicket areas. This shy animal might have been more easily obtained by snaring. The specimen in the sample was probably a young adult, as the wear on the teeth is minimal.

The sample suggests a mixed herding/hunting economy similar to Late Iron Age economies elsewhere in southern Africa. However, a larger sample would be required in order to compare the way of life of the Mzonjani people with that of their more northern neighbours.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Dr Maggs for submitting the material for identification and hope that other early Iron Age sites may help to throw some light on the economy of this period. The Natal sites do not appear to be favourable for the preservation of bone, so that every Iron Age sample should be examined if at all possible.

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Appendix 1: Table 1
Mzonjani, Natal: Description of Fauna

Early Iron Age

Feature 3, surface: cf. <i>Bos taurus</i>	Lobe of erupting upper molar.
Feature 13, surface-3 cm: cf. <i>Bos taurus</i>	Fragment of enamel, possibly from $\overline{P3}$ or $\overline{P4}$.

Late Iron Age

Feature 5, upper shell midden: <i>Bos taurus</i>	Right i2 with medium wear. Burnt.
<i>Cephalophus monticola</i>	Anterior portion of left mandible with $\overline{P3}$, $\overline{P4}$, alveolus for $\overline{P2}$. Light wear on teeth.
Bov.II	Burnt fragment of rib.
Bov.III	Fragment of distal end of metapodial shaft.
Waste bone	2 Bone flakes and 7 miscellaneous skeletal parts.
Feature 13 m from 31080: <i>Bos taurus</i>	Left $\overline{P3}$, $\overline{P4}$, $\overline{M1}$ and $\overline{M3}$ in fragment of mandible.
Waste bone	3 bone flakes, 1 rib fragment and 1 miscellaneous skeletal part.
Surface general	Bov.III
	Fragment of a lower molar and a long bone shaft, probably from a metacarpal.
	Bov.II
	Portion of the distal articulation of an atlas vertebra

APPENDIX 2

MOLLUSCAN AND OTHER SHELL REMAINS

Janet MacKay

(Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg)

Most of the marine molluscs came from the two Late Iron Age midden features—5 and 7. Both were dominated by the brown mussel, *Perna perna*, for which minimum numbers were obtained by sorting right and left hinges and counting the larger group. A variety of other species which occurred in small numbers were identified by R. N. Kilburn (Natal Museum). Several species such as *Sunetta bruggeni*, *Patelloida profunda*, *Donax burnupi*, *Vepricardium asiaticum*, the barnacles and worm tubes would not have been collected as food because of their small size or the depth at which they live. Most were probably attached to other shells while the deep-water species may have been collected as dead shells. Most species are common to rocky shores while *Donax madagascariensis* and *Bullia natalensis* would have been collected from a sandy beach. Both environments are present within about 3 km of the site on the adjacent coastline.

Only two of the EIA features, 2 and 3, yielded marine shells. Both were surface occurrences, No. 2 had LIA contamination and in both cases there were very few shells, therefore this cannot be taken as proof of shellfish exploitation during the EIA occupation. However, evidence from other, similar, sites is positive in this respect and it is probable that most shell as well as bone has weathered away over the intervening 1 700 years.

Feature	Genus and Species	Numbers
2 Surface	<i>Metachatina kraussi</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Crassostrea margaritacea</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Thais capensis</i>	1
3 Surface	<i>Perna perna</i>	2
	<i>Patella barbara</i>	1
5 Surface	<i>Metachatina kraussi</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Crassostrea margaritacea</i>	1 (frag.)

Feature	Genus and Species	Numbers
5 Upper midden	<i>Metachatina kraussi</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Crassostrea margaritacea</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Perna perna</i>	78
	<i>Tivela</i> sp. juvenile	1
	<i>Sunetta bruggeni</i>	1
	<i>Patelloida profunda</i>	1
	<i>Siphonaria capensis</i>	1
	<i>Patella concolor</i>	1
	Land snails	1
	Barnacles	frags
	<i>Pomatoleios kraussi</i> worm tube	1
	<i>Metachatina kraussi</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Perna perna</i>	41
5 Lower midden	<i>Patella barbara</i>	2
	<i>Donax burnupi</i>	1
	<i>Donax madagascariensis</i>	1
	<i>Vepricardium asiaticum</i>	1
	Barnacles	21
	<i>Perna perna</i>	197
	<i>Patella granularis</i>	3
	<i>Patella barbara</i>	1
	<i>Bullia natalensis</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Barbatia obliquata</i>	2
7	<i>Cellana capensis</i>	2
	Barnacles	15 (frags)
	Oyster	1 (frag.)
	<i>Perna perna</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Thais bufo</i>	1 (frag.)
	<i>Glycymeris queketti</i>	1 (frag.)
Surface scattered		